

**Monasterboice
County Louth**

CONSERVATION STUDY

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2 Understanding the Monument

2.1 *Setting and Context*

2.1.1 *Study Area*

The site of Monasterboice is located at the eastern edge of the townland of the same name, in the barony of Ferrard, County Louth. The core zone of the study area extends over a c.120ha area across the townlands of Monasterboice, Newtown-Monasterboice, Bawntaaffe and Timullen. The wider zone extends over a total of c.1,054 ha taking in the townlands of Paddock, Cordoogan, Coolfore, Barabona, Rathdaniel.

The Down Survey map of the barony of Ferrard shows the wider zone of the study area covering all or part of seven large ‘townlands’: Monasterboice (equivalent to the modern townlands of Monasterboice, Timullen, Barabona and Cordoogan); Priestowne (equivalent to the modern townlands of Priest town and Paddock); the northern part of the lands of Melliphont (equivalent to modern townland of Coolfore); Newtown Monasterboice (equivalent to its modern extent); Bawntaaffe (equivalent to its modern extent); Tynure (equivalent to its modern extent); Rathdonel (equivalent to its modern extent) (Fig 5).

This supports the evidence from the records of the Placenames Commission which indicates that the townlands of Timullen, Barabona, Paddock and Cordoogan only developed as distinct entities post-1700, with secure records for Barabona and Paddock only from the early 19th century onwards.

2.1.2 *Topography*

The study area is located approximately 6km north of Drogheda, and just west of the M1 motorway. The core zone of the study area, incorporating the site of Monasterboice, is gently undulating with a general slope from northwest to southeast. The dominant parent material found within the environs of the ecclesiastical remains at Monasterboice is till of Irish Sea origin with limestone and shale (National Soil Survey of Ireland 1980). However, near surface geological variations can be encountered within the north of the core zone where Ordovician, Silurian, and Cambrian shales and mica schists may be encountered (National Soil Survey of Ireland 1980).

Overall the study area is generally low-lying (110mOD or lower); the wider study zone to the west of the site is characterised by a shallow valley aligned on tributaries of the White and Mattock River, this curves around the perimeter of the core zone from north to west to southwest. To the northwest and southeast of the study area are uplands associated with the Black Hill and Red Mountain. The site lies just to the north of the Boyne Valley and it is likely that the top of the round tower (when at its full height) provided views into the valley.

2.2 *The History and Archaeology of Monasterboice*

Monasterboice (Old Irish: *Mainistir Buiti*) appears to have been founded between the late 5th and early 6th century AD; the annals record the death of St Buite c. 520AD (AU 519 & 523; ATig 520; AI & AFM 521) linking it with the birth of Colum Cille. However there are no references to the monastery itself before 723AD (AU); regular references to the site in the annals (mainly clerical obits) commence in the 8th century, ceasing at the start of the 12th century.

Activity at the site does continue into the medieval period, the church at Monasterboice becomes a parochial centre and there is documentary evidence that relics of Saint Buite were still housed there into the 15th or 16th century (Roe 1981). However, in the mid-17th century use of the site as a place of worship declines, though the graveyard continues in use as the main parochial cemetery to the present day.

2.3 *Sources*

2.3.1 *Historical*

A wide variety of historical sources, both primary and secondary were consulted and details of the published editions of the sources consulted are included in the relevant section of the bibliography. The main record source for the site in the early medieval period are the various surviving sets of Irish Annals, primarily the Annals of Ulster (AU), the Annals of Tigernach (ATig), the *Cronicum Scotorum* (CS), the Annals of Inisfallen (AI) and the Annals of the Four Masters (AFM).

Moving into the medieval and post-medieval periods, a wider variety of source material is available including the surviving Registers of the Archbishops of Armagh, manorial extents and other documents relating to land and property. Records held in the National Archives of Ireland include a variety of estate papers as well as the archived files of the Office of Public Works.

Unfortunately significant record sources, both medieval and early post-medieval, for the diocese of Armagh as well as a large number of parochial records were deposited in the Public Record Office, Dublin and were largely destroyed in a fire in 1922, though some transcripts and copies do survive from other archival sources. In addition references to

and excerpts from such sources are included in relevant studies pre-dating 1922 (e.g. Leslie 1911).

The Irish Placenames Commission is in the process of developing an online database and archive of their records (www.logainm.ie) and this source was consulted too.

Several important antiquarian drawings of the site were made in the 18th and 19th centuries, notably those by Thomas Wright, published 1748 and Austin Cooper, dating to 1786. These drawings provide a record of the condition of many of the upstanding elements of the site and can be compared to the subsequent photographic records of the site. There are surviving photographs of Monasterboice taken from the mid-19th century onwards (see Plates 1 and 2 for examples). In addition to illustrating the condition of the site, some of these photographs document the early conservation works undertaken at the site. The National Library of Ireland holds five photographs of the site, dated c. 1910 (National Library Reference Nos. WEL6-8, WEL10-11) and further historic photographs are held in the Photographic Unit of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

2.3.2 *Archaeological*

The basic source of information on the archaeological sites and monuments within the study area is the Record of Monuments and Places (RMP) of The National Monuments Section of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. This resource is based on all published and publicly available documentary and cartographic sources (including the files and records of the Archaeological Survey of Ireland), and the information held in the RMP files is read in conjunction with constraint maps. The RMP records known upstanding archaeological monuments, their original location (in cases of destroyed monuments or excavated sites) and the position of sites identified on vertical aerial photographs and other sources.

‘*Excavations*’ is an annual bulletin, which contains summary accounts of all excavations carried out annually in Ireland. This was consulted to identify archaeological excavations undertaken within the study area. The bulletins range from 1969 to 2004, and can now be accessed on the Internet at www.excavations.ie. In addition the online database of the

National Monuments Service (www.archaeology.ie) can provide a list of licences issued up to 2006. However, no details of the nature of the investigation or its results are included in this database. The annual *Excavations* bulletin contains short notes on the findings.

2.3.3 *Cartographic*

Historical mapping for the site and study area prior to the establishment of the Ordnance Survey is limited, comprising mainly the Down Survey Maps (1657) and Taylor and Skinner's maps (1777).

2.4 *History of Monasterboice*

2.4.1 *Early Medieval Period (5th-12th centuries AD)*

The ecclesiastical site at Monasterboice was most likely founded in the late 5th century. It was a dual foundation with both monks and nuns; a similar situation prevailed in a number of other major ecclesiastical centres such as Kildare and Clonmacnoise. A possible sister-foundation also linked to Saint Buite may be located at Toberboice, Mell, County Louth (Manning 1984).

The monastery was located within the territory of the Ciannachta, who were amongst the most significant of the subject peoples of Brega (Byrne 2000); at one point they controlled most of the coastline between the River Dee in county Louth and the River Liffey in county Dublin (Charles-Edwards 2000, 551-4). However, during the 7th and 8th centuries their political position was increasingly usurped and overshadowed by the northern branch of the Síl nÁeda Sláine (Uí Chonaing, based at Knowth), whose leader began to style himself *rex ciannachta*. The political sphere of influence of the Ciannachta became reduced to the area between the Boyne and Dee-Glyde confluence, commonly referred to as Arda Ciannachta, approximating the modern barony of Ferrard. With the decline in their secular power-base, the Ciannachta interest and involvement within the ecclesiastical sphere appears to increase. In the south the Ciannachta Midi controlled the abbacy of Lusk; the main ecclesiastical families at Duleek and Monasterboice were Ciannachta Breg.

The death of its patron saint and founder Buite m. Bronach is recorded c. 520AD (AU 519AD & 523AD; ATig 520AD; AI & AFM 521AD). A single recension of the saint's life survives (Rawl B. 505); it is quite a late text appearing to combine two earlier vitae – a short vita culminating in Buite's prophecy of the birth of Colum Cille and an account of the saint's boyhood miracles (Plummer 1910 xxxiv-xxxvi, 87-97; Kenny 1929, 372). Genealogical tables (CGSH; Dobbs 1923) place Buite as a member of the Ciannachta, however, as with most other Ciannachta saints (e.g. Cianán; Mac Cuilinn; Finán Lobar) he is linked to the Ciannachta Glenn Gemin, descending from Findchad Ulach m. Condla (Bolger & Harrison 2008, Appendix 1) rather than the Ciannachta Breg.

There are no references to the foundation in the annals until 723AD, when the death of Ailchu of Monasterboice is recorded, his office or position is not stated, but presumably he was a senior cleric, most likely the abbot. Though there are regular references to the site in the annals from this point until the early 12th century, these are mainly clerical obits. The clerics recorded in the annals (Bolger & Harrison 2008, Appendix 2) appear to be members of the Ciannachta Breg, though not all can be easily placed within the genealogy of that dynasty (Bolger & Harrison 2008, Appendix 1). The majority of those recorded are linked only to Monasterboice and are mainly accorded the title of abbot. However there are a couple of significant examples of officeholders at other churches originating from Monasterboice: Eoghan Mainistrech (†834) was abbot of Armagh and Clonard; Muiredach m. Domhnall (†924) was tanise-abbot of Armagh as well as *comarba Buiti*; Muiredach m. Mael Brigte (†935) was *princeps Dam Liac*, his father who died the same year was *princeps Mainistrech*.

The most famous cleric associated with Monasterboice was, of course, Flann Mainistrech (†1056), described in the annals as '*aird-fer leighinn 7 sui senchusa Ereann*' (eminent lector and master of the historical lore of Ireland). He was a prolific poet (Carey 2004, 997-8), with his earliest datable work referring to Mael Sechnaill m. Domnall, king of the southern Uí Néill (c. 1014-22). While it would be expected that Flann's work might reflect an interest in local politics and patronage (and certainly he wrote poems on the dynasties of Mide and Brega, including Síl nÁeda Sláine), a substantial segment of his work is concerned with the kingship and exploits of the Cenél nÉogain either seeking or in response to patronage from that quarter (Byrne 2005b, 269).

Despite its reputation and standing as a centre of learning and literature during the early medieval period, the surviving records for Monasterboice can appear relatively sparse, especially in comparison to the surviving material for sites such as Clonmacnoise, Kildare or Armagh. However, Monasterboice was embedded in overlapping political, ecclesiastical and intellectual networks from which much can be inferred.

It was an important centre of learning and maintained strong intellectual links with other ecclesiastical institutions such as Louth, Slane, Armagh and Clonmacnoise. The influences of these links and networks can be identified in manuscripts such as *Lebor na hUidre* (Byrne 2005a; Breathnach 2003). Understanding these networks is critical to understanding the compilation of such documents. Unfortunately there is very little evidence for the survival of manuscripts originating directly from Monasterboice; though it has been suggested that the Cotton Psalter (B.L. MS Cotton Vitellius F.XI) may be a product of the scriptorium there (O'Sullivan 2005, 532). Poems and texts ascribed to its most famous scholar Flann Mainistrech, do survive in manuscripts compiled at other scriptoria, notably the Book of Leinster and there are indications from surviving texts that his poetical interests were continued by his son Echtigern (Byrne 2005b, 865; 895).

The Ciannachta generally had close links to the Columban familia of churches; Iona and the Columban churches maintained an active interest in Brega, particularly the coastal zone. The ecclesiastical site at Rechru (Lambay Island) was a Columban foundation and later in the period the cult of Columba can be identified at Swords. It has been suggested that Adomnán's hostility towards and criticism of the activities of the *Síl nÁeda Sláine* in his *Vita Columbae* arise from their displacement of Ciannachta hegemony (Byrnes 2000). Further indications of association between the Ciannachta generally, Monasterboice in particular and the Columban familia comes from the association of the death of Buíte and the birth of Colum Cille. Buíte's death bed prophecy of the birth of Colum Cille is contained both in the surviving Latin life of Buíte and also in the Middle Irish *Bretha Colum Cille*, as well as in annalistic sources. The *Bretha Colum Cille* also contains an account of a visit to Monasterboice by Colum Cille (as well as accounts of his foundation of churches within the territories of the Ciannachta, such as Rechru (Lambay Island) and Swords). It has been suggested that the compiler of the *Bretha Colum Cille* used material from a rescension of the life of Buíte (Herbert 1986).

In contrast to this, Monasterboice also had very strong political and ecclesiastical links to Armagh; Muiredach m. Domhnall (†924) was tanise-abbot of Armagh as well as comarba Buiti, in addition to this he was ‘*ard-maer Oa Neill in Deiscirt*’, that is the chief steward of Armagh in Brega. This Muiredach is most commonly linked to the inscription on the southernmost of the high crosses at Monasterboice (though the death of an abbot called Muiredach recorded in 846AD does provide an alternative candidate). On his death his position of steward appears to have passed to Tuathal m. Oenacain (†929) who was bishop of Duleek and Lusk.

At least one abbot of Armagh (Eoghan Mainistrech, †835) was originally from Monasterboice. However, this does add a complication to the relationship. The main ecclesiastical family at Armagh were the Clann Sínaig, a branch of the Airthir, though the main political power in the region was vested in the Cenél nEógain branch of the Uí Néill. In fact Armagh and her clerics strongly resisted being subsumed into the Cenél nEógain hegemony. To judge from the accounts contained in the annals, Eoghan’s abbacy was imposed on Armagh by the Cenél nEógain, after their defeat of the Airghialla (including the Airthir) at Leth Cam (827AD). This battle marked the critical collapse of the Airghialla power-base in the face of Cenél nEógain aggression. Eoghan Mainistrech was *fer leiginn* at Monasterboice according to AFM and ‘spiritual advisor’ to Niall Caille, ruler of Cenél nEógain. The association between Monasterboice and the Cenél nEógain should be noted in light of the indication of patronage from that dynasty for Flann Mainistrech, also *fer leiginn*, two centuries later.

Another interesting point in relation to Monasterboice concerns the lack of any definite record of Norse raids on the site. However, it is not unique in this regard (e.g. Fore, Killeslin, Moone, Fahan) and there are many other churches for which only one or two raids are recorded over the whole of the period. Monasterboice was located in a particularly vulnerable location though, close to the coast and a major waterway (the Boyne) as well as the Norse base near Linn Duachaill (Annagassan, County Louth). Raids on other churches in the region such as Clonmore, Duleek and Dunleer (Lann Léire) are well attested. In 832AD, the annals record the burning of Duleek along with the territory of the Ciannachta and ‘all its churches’; it seems likely that Monasterboice would have been included in this raid. Another point which should be considered when assessing the evidence for Norse raiding is the fact that there are only two entries in the annals (AU 970AD; AU 1097AD) about Monasterboice which are not clerical obituaries.

One of these two references, however, is of relevance to this debate. The annals for 970AD record the sacking of Monasterboice and Dunleer by Domnall ua Néill of the Cenél nEógain; in an associated attack Louth and Dromiskin were similarly raided by Muirheartach m. Domhnall. The deaths of three hundred people in a single building were recorded suggesting that this was a quite serious attack. AFM, however, specifically states that the raids were carried out '*for Ghallaibh*', that is against the foreigners. This would indicate both Norse presence and Norse control at these sites. Amlaíb Cuarán who controlled Dublin at this time, had a long established alliance with the northern branch of the Síl nÁeda Sláine (the Uí Chonaing based at Knowth), beginning with Congalach m. Maile Mithig, the last of the dynasty to be acknowledged king of Tara and Domnall ua Néill's immediate predecessor (Woolfe 2002). Domnall was concerned for most of his reign with suppressing the political aspiration of the midlands dynasties, in particular those of Amlaíb and his ally Domnall m. Congalaig. The raid which included Monasterboice seems to have been a reprisal for his defeat at Cell Móna (Kilmoone, Co. Westmeath) by the two allies in the same year (Woolfe 2002, 42).

The other significant event at Monasterboice, which is recorded in the annals, is the destruction of books and treasures in 1097AD when the round tower caught fire. This would indicate that much of the library of Monasterboice may have been destroyed or badly damaged. Within 30 years references to the foundation in the annals cease.

Given its reputation as a centre for literature and learning (and the renown of its scholars), it is likely that Monasterboice would have developed and maintained its own set of annals and other records. While traces of genealogies and records likely to have been produced or preserved through the literate tradition at Monasterboice do survive, the generally low profile of the site within the historic record may be attributable to the fire.

2.4.2 *Twelfth Century Reform*

The decline in prominence of the site in the early 12th century seems quite rapid. The most common theory is that the loss of all or a significant portion of its library in the fire of 1097AD followed by the foundation of Mellifont in 1142AD triggered a fatal collapse in patronage and support for Monasterboice (Macalister 1946; Roe 1981). However, as the annal entry for 970AD indicates, this was not the first time that the monastery

experienced significant and substantial damage to its infrastructure. Also the final clerical obits contained in the annals attest to the learning of the deceased.

The twelfth century was a period of major ecclesiastical change and upheaval, and this may be a far more significant factor in the decline of Monasterboice as an important ecclesiastical centre. The reform of the organisation of the Irish church during the 12th century began with the establishment of a new national diocesan structure at the Synod of Ráith Bressail in 1111AD. This saw the elimination of the small petty bishoprics which characterised the church in Ireland since the 5th century; the new diocesan structure was revised and redeveloped in subsequent synods. From the obits of Cormaic Mainistrech (†1092), Maicnia (†1039), Flaithroa (†837) and Buite himself we know Monasterboice was an Episcopal church under the old system. Therefore the changes wrought by Ráith Bressail and later 12th century synods would have diminished the standing of the site.

Under the structure established at Ráith Bressail, Monasterboice would have been situated at the southern extent of the new diocese of Armagh, reflecting the long established connection between Armagh and the churches of county Louth, including Monasterboice. However, by the 1130's the newly resurgent kingdom of Airgialla had extended political control over the present county Louth. The kingdom of Airgialla had strong historical links to the diocese of Clogher, with its kings acting as patrons of the diocese. The king of Airgialla, Donnchad Ó Cearbhaill sought to include his new lands in Louth within the diocese of Clogher, and lent his support to the reform movement and Malachy Ó Moirgair in his bid for the bishopric of Armagh to achieve this end. Though Malachy agreed to the transfer in 1142AD, the annexation of Louth was contested by most of the successive bishops of Armagh until the 1190s when it was finally returned to the diocese of Armagh (Smyth 1991, 29), though echoes of the dispute rumbled on into the 13th century.

The foundation of both the Arrouasian abbey at Louth and the Cistercian abbey at Mellifont in 1142AD has been linked with this dispute (Smyth 1991). Donnchad Ó Cearbhaill provided the endowments for both foundations, presumably as part of the process of establishing control over his new territories (Smyth 1991, 27). In fact the see of the diocese of Clogher itself temporarily transferred to Louth Abbey from 1142 until 1196-8AD (Smyth 1991, 27-29).

However, in the case of Mellifont, it quite early on developed a strategic link with Armagh, rather than Clogher or the Airgialla. The leading roles in the consecration of the abbey in 1157AD were undertaken by Gilla Meic Liag, archbishop of Armagh and Muircheartach Mac Lochlainn of the Cenél nEógain. In 1196AD, the then archbishop of Armagh Tomaltach Ó Conchobhair, relocated to Mellifont for the remaining 5 years of his life as a result of the repeated raiding of the city of Armagh (Smith 1991, 30).

It would appear that rather than simply diverting patronage, Mellifont had assumed a relationship with Armagh analogous with that enjoyed by Monasterboice in previous centuries, when its abbots and *airchinnigh* had acted as chief stewards for Armagh. This new relationship may even have been promoted by Armagh (to the detriment of its earlier links to Monasterboice) in order to undermine the threat to its authority in Louth from the combined ambitions of the Airgialla and the Clogher diocese.

2.4.3 *Later Medieval Period (13th-16th centuries AD)*

Any surviving records pertaining to the church and lands of Monasterboice in the 12th and 13th centuries have yet to be identified; however there are regular, if episodic, references to the church and lands from the early 14th century onwards.

The site would appear to have evolved into a parochial centre. The earliest cleric referred to is Geoffrey, possibly the chaplain (Leslie 1911, 376) and there are further references to chaplains and curates in documents from the 15th and 16th centuries (Leslie 1911, 376; Leslie 1948, 138). The construction of the North Church in the 13th century and the subsequent refurbishment of the South Church in the 15th century are also evidence of the continued use of the site. It is most likely that the South Church functioned as the main parish church, since it would have been the larger of the two; in addition a later 17th century document refers to the parish church as having both a nave and chancel (Leslie 1911, 376).

Research to date has not shed much light on any relationship between the old ecclesiastical settlement of Monasterboice and the establishment of medieval settlement at Newtown Monasterboice. There are references to the latter from at least 1297 onwards (MacIomhair 1971, 80). With the exception of a brief period in the early 14th century both

lands appear to be in separate ownership. While the development of a secular settlement at Newtown Monasterboice could be viewed as either reactive to or further contributing to the decline of the original ecclesiastical settlement, it might equally reflect the differential treatment and development of separate manorial landholdings.

At the start of the 14th century Armagh laid claims to the lands of Monasterboice. The archbishop of the time, Nicholas Mac Mael Íosa was active in reasserting his rights to lands and estates in Louth. Having already engaged in litigation to secure his hold on the archbishopric's manors of Termonfeckin and Dromiskin, he launched suits to recover a total of 93 acres of lands at Monasterboice in 1301-2, probably approximate in size to the modern townland (MacIomhair 1971, 79-80). He also claimed lands in Newtown Monasterboice (MacIomhair 1971, 80), which are likely those included in a rent roll of the manor of Termonfeckin dating to c. 1620 (Murray 1941, 116). The outcome of his suits in relation to Monasterboice is less clear, though presumed successful (MacIomhair 1971, 80).

Within about thirty years, however, the lands and rectory of Monasterboice had passed to the control of the Hospital of St. John, Kilmainham, as they are included in a grant to Richard Broun in 1338. The lands are given in a number of subsequent documents as extending to 60 acres as well as including a watermill and 2 messuages (Chart 1935, 134-8; White 1941, 107; Griffith 1991, 110-1; Nicholls 1994, Vol. II, 193). It is not clear exactly how the lands came into the possession of the Hospitallers. Much of the Hospitaller's holdings in county Louth appear to derive from grants originally made to the Knights Templar, including the Preceptory or manor of Kilsaran, within which Monasterboice is listed at the dissolution in 1540-1. However, Monasterboice is not included in any of the surviving documents pertaining to the holdings of the Knights Templar at their suppression (MacIvor, 1960-1). At the dissolution, the rectory and lands of Monasterboice along with those of the Preceptory or manor of Kilsaran were held by Oliver Plunkett, from the Hospitallers (White 1941, 107). A fiant of 1569-70 records the grant of Monasterboice to Thomas Plunkett, Baron of Louth, along with other lands including the Preceptory of Kilsaran, by Elizabeth I, reciting the previous lease from the Hospitallers (Nicholls 1994, Vol. II, 193).

2.4.4 *Post-medieval period (17th century AD to present)*

The lands of Monasterboice remained under the control of the Barons of Louth into the 17th century. However, through their involvement with the rebellion of 1641, most of their estates were forfeited to the Crown; some of these lands were subsequently granted away under Cromwell. After the restoration of Charles II, most of the estates were returned to Matthew Plunkett, 7th Baron Louth; a surviving copy of this grant dated 1675 (National Archives: 1004/1/2/2) includes the Preceptory of Kilsaran and the lands of Monasterboice in the recitation of the estates forfeited by Oliver, 6th Baron Louth. However, this document also clearly states that the Preceptory lands were not returned as they had already been granted to one William Legge. The lands of Monasterboice are not specifically included in this or in the recitation of the estates returned to Matthew. Presumably they had been re-granted elsewhere, possibly as part of the Preceptory lands.

Ownership of the lands of Monasterboice in the late 17th and early 18th centuries is somewhat unclear, though by the mid-to late 18th century surviving papers relating to the Clermont Estate held in the National Archives indicate that the lands were in the possession of Edward Smyth from 1767, remaining in his family until 1817. Smyth's land-holding is described as comprising the 'lands of Monasterboyce and its sub-denominations of Corduggan and Tymullin', which would equate with the 'townland' of Monasterboice illustrated on the Down's Survey Map (Fig. 4) and correspond to the modern townlands of Monasterboice, Barabona, Cordoogan and Timullen.

A review of the title to the lands of Monasterboice was carried out prior to the sale in 1817 as the title deeds were missing (National Archives: 1004/1/38/15; 1004/1/38/29), and includes a list of relevant entries in the registry of deeds post-1708. The review notes a record of the transfer of the lands from Lord Dartmouth to one Charles Campbell in 1699; the records noted from the Registry of Deeds include a series of leases issued by Benjamin Burton of Burton Hall (though the entries are dated 1759, they presumably refer to the Benjamin Burton of Burton Hall, Co. Carlow who died in 1711). There is also a note that Richard and Phillip Tisdale held the lands prior to 1736.

In 1817 these lands are recorded as sold to Rev. Charles William Wole; the rent role compiled at the time of the sale shows that the lands of Monasterboice were leased to various members of the Foster family of Glyde (National Archives: 1004/1/38/14) and split into two main parcels with one referred to as 'Churchtown', presumably the modern

townland, the other parcel would correspond to Barabona. Cordoogan and Timullen appear to be divided into much smaller parcels with eight principal tenants listed in each.

Though there are records of curates for Monasterboice into the 17th century, by 1622 the church is described as ruinous. From 1644 the parish was unified with Dunleer, eventually becoming part of the union of Cappocke, Dunleer, Drumcar and Moylary. It also seems likely that the site ceased to be used as a place of worship in the mid to late 17th century. Records from 1690, state that the church was in disrepair and that the appointed curate had not been in the parish for two years; however the description of both a nave and chancel confirms that it was the south church which was the main parochial church, of the two at the site.

It does not appear that any restoration work was undertaken on either of the churches prior to the works of the late 19th century (see Section 3.4). Illustrations of the site from the mid-to-late 18th century show the round tower roofless and the north church both roofless and with its eastern gable demolished, much as it stands today. The 1786 drawing of the site by Austin Cooper does show more detail of the south church, with the chancel arch still standing and part of the nave, including a square headed window. It is not clear at what date the graveyard was first enclosed, but a graveyard wall was certainly in place by 1786 as it appears on this illustration also. Though the site declined as a place of worship in the post-medieval period, its use as a parochial cemetery has continued to the present day.

5 Cultural Significance of the Monument

5.1 Basis of Assessment of Significance

The assessment of significance reflects the cultural and environmental/ecological aspects of the monument as a whole, particularly in relation to early medieval ecclesiastical foundations generally as well as assessing individual elements of the site on their own merits. Several methodologies were considered to assess the levels of significance, in accordance with those used for the study of complex and composite monuments like Monasterboice. After some consideration, the approach used in the recent Conservation Plan for Newtown Jerpoint, Co. Kilkenny was adopted, as it was found to be an excellent template for assessing of all of the elements at Monasterboice. A summary of the criteria used are:

Exceptional Significance: Elements of the monument which are of national or international significance, that could be classed as the best (or the only surviving example) of an important type of monument, or outstanding representatives of important social or cultural phenomena, or are of very major regional or local significance.

Considerable Significance: Elements which constitute good and representative examples of an important type of monument (or the only example locally), or have a particular significance through association or atypical characteristics although surviving examples may be relatively common nationally, or are major contributors to the overall significance of the monument.

Moderate Significance: Elements which contribute to the character and understanding of the monument, or which provide an historical or cultural context for features of individually greater significance.

Low Significance: Elements which are individually low value in general terms, or have little or no significance in promoting understanding or appreciation of the monument, without being actually intrusive.

Intrusive: Items which are visually intrusive or which obscure understanding of significant elements or values of the monument, or have any other negative affect on the overall presentation and condition of the monument (Oxford Archaeology 2007: pp. 46-7).

5.2 ***Key Elements of Significance***

5.2.1 *The High Crosses*

All of the High Crosses from Monasterboice, but particularly Muiredach's Cross and the Tall Cross are of exceptional significance, both nationally and internationally. Taken all together, the High Crosses of Ireland must surely be regarded as the country's greatest contribution to European sculpture – and not just of the Middle Ages. Seen in that context, the two complete crosses at Monasterboice are among the most imposing and best-preserved of them and, for that reason, have to be properly maintained for future generations to be able to enjoy them. Muiredach's Cross is a particularly rare example because it includes an inscription that is virtually complete and legible.

The crosses and their iconography can be clearly linked to other Irish sites of the period, particularly Clonmacnoise and form part of an overall national sculptural corpus and tradition. However, even within such a corpus, the Monasterboice examples stand out; Muiredach's Cross is one of the most complete and complex of all the Irish High Crosses, encompassing as it does a range of biblical subjects glorifying Christ as King of the Earth and the Cosmos, as well as a great variety of geometric designs the significance of which we no longer understand. As a piece of sculpture, it is remarkable for the number of figures it includes, particularly the crowd scene that is The Last Judgment, but also for the serenity of the triplet figures on the west face of the shaft. Their characterisation through facial expression is a tour-de-force that has managed to survive generations of erosion – and which can only heighten our respect for the master masons, who were able to recognise and choose such a weather-resistant sandstone. The detail on Muiredach's Cross is some of the best preserved on any of the High Crosses, and show the high quality of the mason who carved them (who may also have been responsible for some of the figures on other crosses, including even as far away as Clonmacnoise).

However, the quality and complexity of the sculpture of the crosses also shows some of the clearest examples of how the Irish tradition both imbibed and incorporated diverse

influences ranging across the whole of Western Europe. Parallels for the iconography and decoration of the Monasterboice crosses can be identified from:

- frescoes in the churches of Rome (e.g. church of Santa Maria Antiqua) and others in Carolingian churches in and north of the Alps, particularly that in the World Heritage church at Müstair
- late Roman mosaics, probably filtered through Carolingian France
- Anglo-Saxon decorative traditions

It is likely that Carolingian France, in particular, provided the transfer point for much of the Roman iconographic and sculptural influence identifiable at Monasterboice.

5.2.2 *The Stone Churches*

Both stone churches are of considerable significance. Their construction and refurbishment point to the continuity of use, vibrancy and local importance of the site, during a period when traditional scholarship had relegated the site to ‘parochial centre’ (Macalister 1946; Roe 1981).

The South Church does appear to be pre-Romanesque in its original design; the remains of the west doorway are typical of this style. However, some of its features are atypical; such as the thinness of the walls for the size of the church; and the length to breadth ratio of two to one. Both its repeated refurbishment and later historical account indicate that it was the main congregational church down to the 17th century.

While it is not unusual to find two (or indeed more) churches at Irish ecclesiastical sites, which would have been in contemporary usage, such arrangements would typically date no later than the 12th century. As such the apparent construction of the North Church in the thirteenth century, after the arrival of Anglo-Norman settlers to the area, is highly unusual.

5.2.3 *The Round Tower*

The round tower is of considerable significance. Though round towers are associated with many early medieval Irish ecclesiastical sites, the example which survives at Monasterboice, when it was complete, was believed to have been one of the tallest round

towers in Ireland. Further historical documentation, as well as structural morphology, allows its construction to be clearly dated to the 11th century.

5.2.4 *The Enclosure Complex*

The evidence for an enclosure complex and potentially rich sub-surface archaeology at Monasterboice is of exceptional significance. Recent experience through discoveries associated with the major infrastructure projects, such as the investigations at the periphery of the enclosure complex associated with the contemporary ecclesiastical site at Clonfad, Co. Westmeath (Stevens 2007), clearly illustrates the potential at Monasterboice. Many comparable sites of the period such as Armagh, Duleek or Dunshaughlin are located in urban or semi-urban village locations. These reduce the potential for survival of sub-surface archaeology as well as restricting the options and opportunities for research and archaeological investigation.

5.2.5 *The Graveyard*

Use of the site for burial would have commenced with the foundation of the ecclesiastical settlement, in the late 5th century, though perhaps initially restricted primarily to the members of the ecclesiastical community, associated lay-tenants (the *manaig*) and important church patrons; it is likely burial at the site has continued unbroken to the present. However the Bronze Age burial found within the graveyard in the 19th century suggests that the tradition of burial at the site could extend much further back than previously expected. The erection of gravestones began in the 18th century (prior to this graves were either unmarked or distinguished only by low stone or timber markers) (Longfield 1974). The fine examples of headstone sculpture at Monasterboice, particularly those of late 18th to early 19th century date (Longfield 1945; 1951; 1974) are of considerable to moderate significance.

5.2.6 *Ecology*

The ecology of the site is of moderate significance within the surrounding landscape because the graveyard at the core of the monument contains a number of semi-natural habitats. The most significant habitat is the mature trees within the graveyard, some of which show potential for bats. The stone graveyard boundary wall also supports a diversity of plant species. Beyond the graveyard, the hedgerows and tree lines which make up many of the field boundaries are important for wildlife because of their

structural and species diversity and their role as ecological corridors, particularly in areas of intensive farmland.

5.3 *Overall Significance of Monasterboice*

Monasterboice is a very important example of an early medieval ecclesiastical foundation; it is of exceptional significance, incorporating both upstanding early medieval structures as well as an extensive, surrounding sub-surface archaeological site. While the quality and significance of the High Crosses at the site would be sufficient in themselves to lend this level of significance to the site as a whole, the complex in its entirety is a highly integrated and well-preserved, historic cultural entity, with the evident connections between its elements increasing its cultural significance overall.

The site may have been founded as early as the 5th century AD, placing it within the missionary period and potentially associated with the early spread of Christianity.

Historically, the site is linked to the dynasties of the Ciannachta and is likely to have been the primary church of the territory which became known as Arda Ciannachta. Monasterboice was an Episcopal church prior to the Synod of Raith Breasail (AD1111), further reinforcing that contention. It was renowned during the medieval period as a centre of scholarship and learning; the scholarship of its clerics is regularly noted in the annals and its most famous son Flann Mainistrech, was considered one of the pre-eminent scholars of the age.

Fig 1. (a) SOUTH CROSS: EAST FACE



Fig. 1 (b) SOUTH CROSS WEST FACE



Fig. 1 (c) SOUTH CROSS: NORTH FACE



Fig. 1 (d) SOUTH CROSS: SOUTH FACE

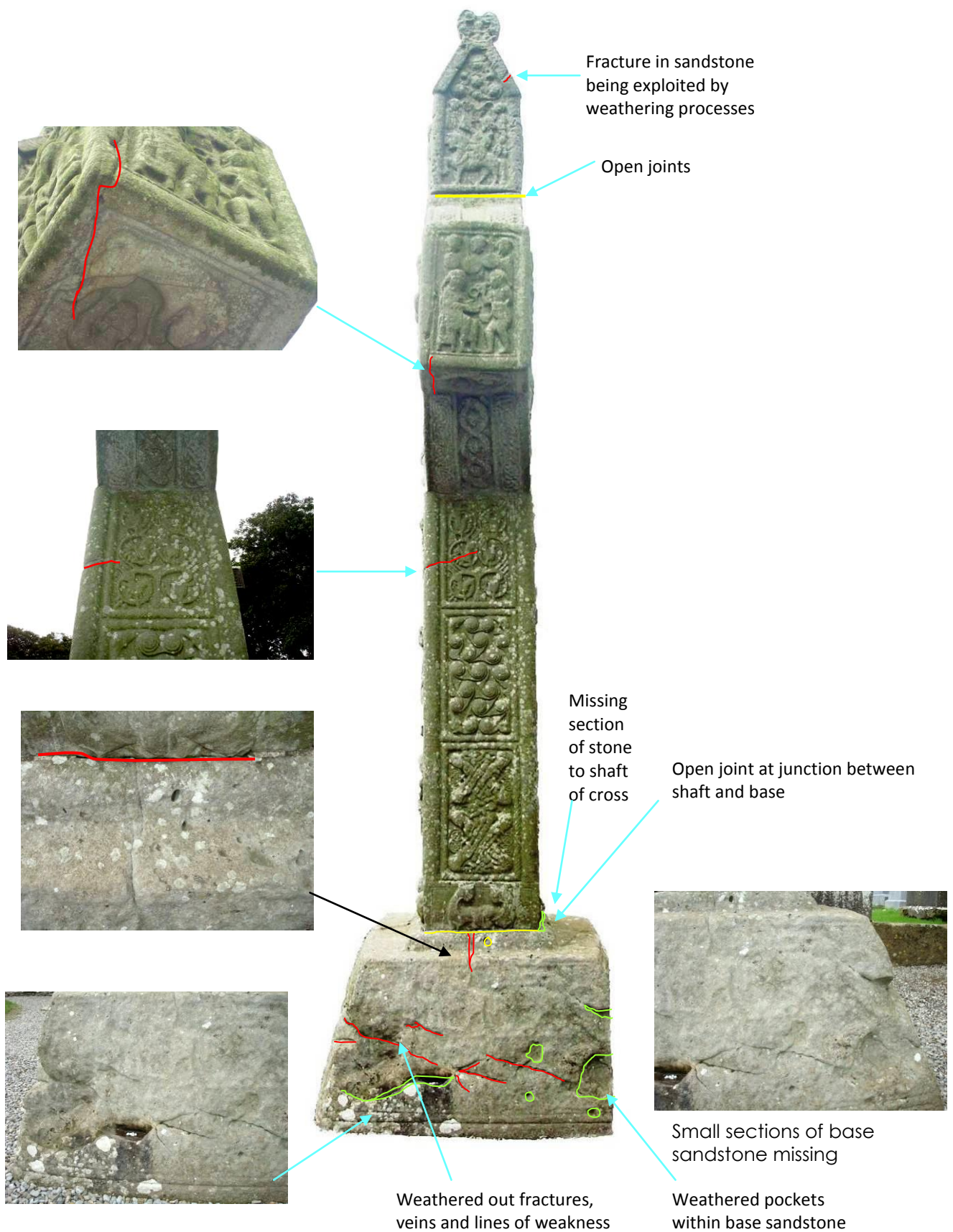


Fig 2 (e) WEST CROSS: WEST FACE
PHOTO COMPARISON



Black & White Photo taken ~1981



Note:
Loss of
carved
detail to
the base
stone

Images form September 2008 Survey

Fig. 2 (a) WEST CROSS: EAST FACE



Fig. 2 (b) WEST CROSS: WEST FACE





Fig. 2 (c) WEST CROSS: NORTH FACE



Fig 2 (d) (i) WEST CROSS: SOUTH FACE

The section below the main central cross is more weathered and scaling evident on this elevation.

The more weathered top to the shaft could indicate that the top of the cross shaft was exposed for a period of time before the central section was refixed.

Weathering along a natural weakness in the stone

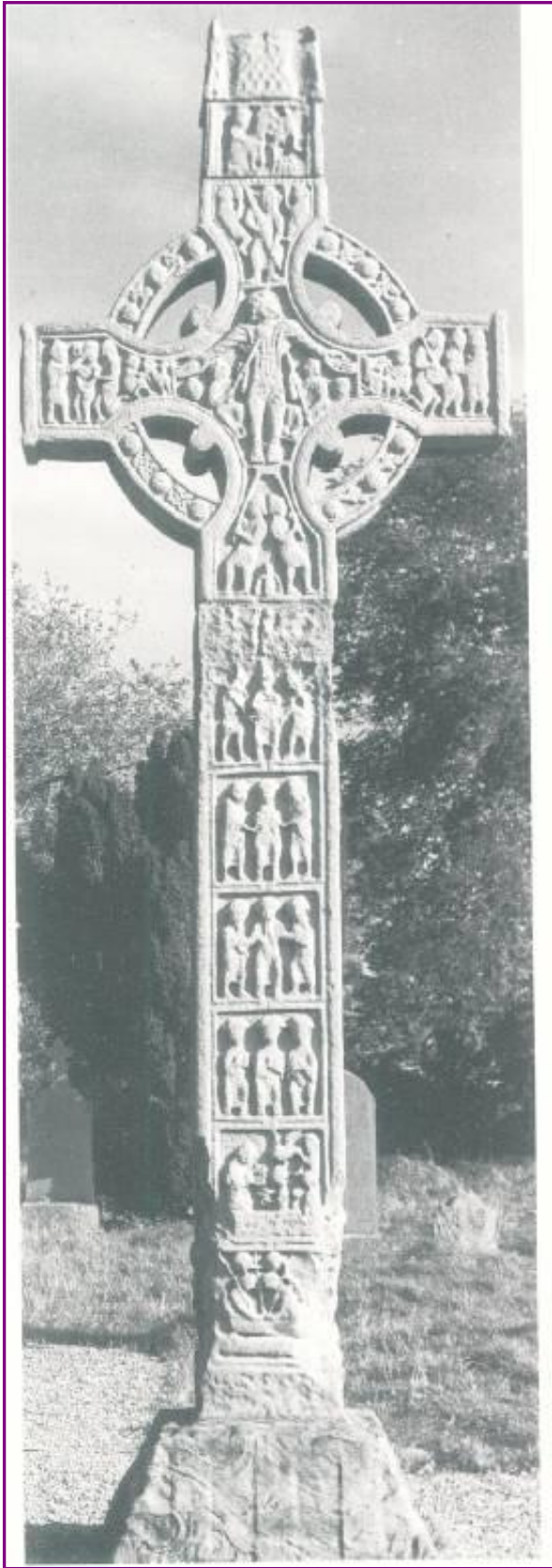
Sandstone scale appears loose

Loss of carved detail directly below central section



Fig 2 (d) (i) WEST CROSS: SOUTH FACE





Black & White Photo taken ~1981

Fig 2 (e) WEST CROSS: WEST FACE
PHOTO COMPARISON



Note:
Loss of
carved
detail to
the base
stone

Images from September 2008 Survey

Fig 3. NORTH CROSS



NOTE: Lean to North Cross.
Weathering of the sandstone cross
Appears to be proceeding along bedding planes
parallel to outer surface causing scaling.

Sandstone remnants. Have been
repaired and braced

